

# 1 Introduction

## Approaches to Muslim Sects and Schools

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### Why Read a Book on Muslim Sects and Schools?

This is a book about intra-religious divisions among Muslims – what medieval Muslims might have called *firaq* (sing. *firqa*), or *niḥal* (sing. *niḥla*), and contemporary Muslims might call *ṭawāʿif* (sing. *ṭāʿifa*) or *madhāhib* (sing. *madhhab*). That is to say, it is a book about how Muslims have, over the course of their long history and in the many geographical areas where they found themselves, forged and often reformed divergent notions of what it means to be a Muslim. This process might be called “sectarianism,” or even “Islamic sectarianism,” though the moniker is fraught with problems, not the least of which being that several of the recognized divisions (*firaq*) among Muslims (e.g. Muʿtazilites and Murjiʿites) would not technically qualify as being “sects” according to the myriad scholarly definitions of that term. To account for this particular issue, this work focuses on Muslim sects and “schools,” meaning here schools of thought, as a means of approaching what Muslim authors might have implied when they described these groups as *firaq*, *niḥal*, *madhāhib*, or *ṭawāʿif*.

At the outset, it is worth asking after the purpose of such a book. Why read it? On the face of it, it would seem that current world conditions make the answers to these questions obvious: communal unrest or outright violence in Muslim-majority countries such as Iraq, Bahrain, Lebanon, Yemen, and Pakistan (to name a few) often gets articulated in sectarian terms, not only by the actors and the victims of such violence but also by the various journalists, anchors, and writers whose task it is to report and explain these events to the rest of the world. For many popular media outlets, affiliations, such as Sunni or Shiʿa, offer convenient identity markers by bounding groups by their communal affiliation. These sectarian classifications are meant to “make sense” of conflict in the Islamic world by providing their readers a means to navigate that world, and they gain legitimacy as explanatory devices insofar as they reflect the ways that some Muslims articulate the underlying causes of their conflicts. Indeed, many

Sunnis and Shi'a, among others, employ sectarian categories as a means to identify themselves, or as the basis for polemics (as a simple search of the Internet will show), or as a reason to engage in violence. Journalists, then, can accurately claim that their reporting reflects "local" perceptions of the situation on the ground.

Explanations that aim to be taken as more sophisticated often come seasoned with historical accounts of the first disputes among Muslims over the succession to the Prophet Muḥammad, and of the subsequent sectarian divisions that developed therefrom. In this way, contemporary conflicts between different kinds of Muslims receive a history, and sectarian conflict is presented as part and parcel of the meta-historical narrative of Muslims. Thus, the seemingly inherent nature of sectarian conflict, or – in its more sophisticated form – the *longue durée* approach to Islamic sectarianism, would be assumed to do the work of "explaining" contemporary instances of communal tension, intra-religious polemic, or violence. The simple invocation of "Sunni" or "Shi'a" or other identifiers such as "Wahhābī," "Salafī," and "Aḥmadī" are assumed to be sufficient in and of themselves as explanatory devices. Or these conflicts are presented with reference to the origins and presumed longevity of sectarian monikers over the long course of Islamic history.

These lines of thinking remain flawed in several fundamental ways. First, the simplistic invocation of "Sunni" and "Shi'a" (or other identifiers) as explanatory devices for contemporary polemic or conflict in the Islamic world falls apart when we encounter the equally numerous examples of Sunnis and Shi'a, to which we could add the Ibāḍiyya, living together in relative harmony. In other words, simply being Sunni, Shi'a, or Ibāḍī is not enough to automatically create conflict with other Muslims of a different communal affiliation. More to the point, this all-too-common move to essentialize Muslim sectarian identities obscures the very interesting questions of how Muslims acquire, maintain, and manipulate their communal affiliations, as well as the extent to which such affiliations might overlap or break down altogether. After all, Muslims are not born Sunni, Shi'a, or Ibāḍī (nor were they born Khārijites, Murjī'ites, or Mu'tazilites in the medieval periods), but must first imbibe the meanings of such associations before they themselves go on to determine the extent to which such affiliations matter. Accordingly, the existence of historical figures who defy easy categorization as Sunni, Shi'a, or other (such as Abū 'Abdullāh Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī, Hajī Bektāsh Velī, or Timurlane, to name a few) tends to erode confidence in the utility of sectarian markers as fixed taxonomies of identification.

Also concealed by the essentializing of sectarian identifications is the question of when, and under what conditions, sectarian differences can be mustered in the service of polemic or violence. It conceals what “activates” sectarian affiliations and makes them “gain the salience needed to elicit a shift in levels of self-definition” to the point that such groups become willing to engage in confrontation.<sup>1</sup> It must be noted that sectarian difference, here to be treated as a form of intra-religious identification, often stands alongside of (and sometimes in competition with) other modes of identification. For example, a person’s primary outlook might also be global-humanist, interreligious, ethnic, linguistic, familial, tribal, national, or even ritual/performative (among others). In order to become a dominant mode of self-identification, sect/school identities must be imbued with significant meaning, so much so that sectarian differences begin to stand in front of other types of identification, including Qur’-an-grounded exhortations toward unity among Muslims that are embedded in the concept of the *umma* (the Islamic community writ large). Moreover, in order to effect violence sect identifications must overcome the barriers to action that seem to characterize studies of human behavior. Confrontation requires significant time and energy (as any who have engaged in formal debates know), and thus a good many, if not most, people seek to evade it by tolerating or simply ignoring other people. Moments of sectarian “activation,” then, remain necessarily grounded in specifically charged, and often local, circumstances and may involve a whole host of social, political, economic, and religious issues. Simply pointing toward sectarian affiliation, therefore, obscures the ways that a given group of Muslims in a given time and place “activate” such identifications with the purpose of resisting, confronting, or possibly fighting other types of Muslims.

Equally limiting is the assumption that the *longue durée* history of sectarian difference can be marshaled to explain modern instances of violence in which sect identification is a factor. This is not to say that the long history of Islamic sects and schools is unimportant, but rather to stress that the origin and development of various Muslim groups goes only so far as a means of elucidating contemporary conflicts between, for example, Sunnis and Shi’ites.<sup>2</sup> History and its role in bolstering

<sup>1</sup> Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 10.

<sup>2</sup> Many journalistic accounts of contemporary sectarian conflicts in the Islamic world do not end up providing much in the way of actual historical analysis, and thus do not really qualify as *longue durée* explanations. Many tend to provide accounts of the early succession debates, or perhaps the Battle of Siffin, but then jump to the present. Implicit in such a move is the idea that Islamic sectarianism is a phenomenon with a long history (despite the fact that authors often do not provide much of that history), and that this longevity “explains” recent iterations of sectarian conflict among Muslims. In essence, such

sectarianism remains only part of this story. Historical narratives of sect identification illuminate the trajectory of ideas through time, and explain some of their inertia. However, references to events of the seventh century CE cannot explain the activities of twentieth-century actors. Thus, the recent violence between Iraqi Sunnis and Shi'a (and the many non-Iraqis that joined in that conflict) must be elucidated, in large part, with reference to the recent history of Iraq: that is, the Iranian Revolution of 1978 that pitted a revolutionary vision of a Shi'ite-inspired Islamic government against Saddam Hussein's secular-socialist totalitarianism; the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq in which Saddam Hussein treated Shi'ites as a fifth column; the First Gulf War with its doomed Shi'ite uprising in southern Iraq; the Second Gulf War and the rise of various Sunni and Shi'ite militias; and so on (to mention but a limited number of these factors, and briefly at that).<sup>3</sup> So too, sectarian conflicts in Bahrain, Pakistan, Lebanon, and the Yemen must be approached by weighting the recent histories of those countries. A *longue durée* history of sectarian difference will certainly contribute to this project, but it will not ultimately explain the core issues driving these local struggles.

A third and rather insidious assumption underlying the move to explain contemporary violence and confrontation in Islamdom is the supposition that such violence is inherently religious in nature, and thus must be explained with reference to religious categories of identification. Setting aside the problems of defining "religious" violence, it is worth noting how this assumption tacitly favors a "secular" view of conflicts where religion or religious affiliations play a role. According to such a view, removing religion from the equation (presumably by introducing a "secular" element) should remove the main driver of violence. However, not only do religious identifications seem to play a contingent role in such conflicts (recalling that sectarian affiliation must be "activated" in some fashion, usually involving social, political, economic, or other motivators), but such an assumption relies on views toward religion that mark it as irrational due to its emotional appeal, instable in the public sphere, and given to provoking extreme ("fanatical," "zealous") responses in human beings. Such a simplistic view of religion is to be avoided on principle, to say nothing of how it obscures the complex of factors (including whatever we might designate as the "religious") that contribute to specific instances of tension or violence in the world.

treatments use the cover of history to essentialize Islamic sectarianism as a driver of contemporary violence between Muslims.

<sup>3</sup> See Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 32ff.

For all of these reasons, a book on Islamic sects and schools that provides descriptions and history of the main Muslim *firq* will be of limited use to those who seek an understanding of the conflicts plaguing the Muslim world today. Consequently, this work is emphatically not a book that deals with today's sectarian conflicts: it ends its analysis before the twelfth/eighteenth century, and does not highlight the topic of religious violence as such. It is, on the other hand, a book about Muslims and their differences: specifically, the kind of intra-Islamic differences that are tied to religious rituals, histories, beliefs, and other kinds of things. It is a book that navigates the long development of these religious differences among Muslims, and charts the subsequent ways by which such differences were periodically made to stand between them as a marker of their specific intra-religious affiliations. And herein lies the value of an exploration of Muslim sects and schools. Religious identification turns out to be a complex process, shaped by innumerable factors, and insofar as these divergent means of articulating "Islam" allow for an appreciation of the development of different Islamic perspectives, it also illuminates the ways that human beings create identities for themselves and others. The questions raised in the preceding paragraphs about how Muslims acquire, maintain, and manipulate communal affiliations, the extent to which such affiliations might overlap or break down altogether, as well as the question of how local circumstances affect the "activation" of sect identification provide the guiding principles behind this exploration. A welcome side benefit to this approach is that it explodes the idea of a monolithic Islam, and of fixed sectarian or school identifications that can be adopted "as is" for any occasion. The rich texture of Islamic thought, herein examined through the lens of sects and schools, reflects the diversity of human thought. And if this work does nothing more than allow a glimpse into the complex, sometimes sublime, too-often tragic workings of the fellow human beings that call themselves Muslim, then it will have succeeded.

### Narratives of Muslim Sects and Schools

What is a sect, and what is a "school of thought"? And why use two different English terms as the equivalent of what in Islamic literature is usually rendered by a singular term? To answer these questions, we must approach the ways that the metanarratives, what Somers also calls the "master narratives" and I have often called the "grand narratives," of sect/school division were and are articulated.<sup>4</sup> Medieval Muslim historians and theologians developed several concepts and taxonomies to help them

<sup>4</sup> Somers, "The Narrative Constitution of Identity," 619ff.

explain the existence of, and navigate their place among, the *firaq*. As we are largely dependent on the sources that they created for our own understanding of Muslim sects and schools, it behooves us to examine the ways that they conceptualized their subject. And for the same reason, we must first scrutinize the ways that we, as students and researchers in English-speaking (part of the so-called Western) academies, have inherited a discourse about sects and philosophical/theological schools of thought that guide the way that we speak and think about religious difference.

The English word “sect” derives from the Latin *secta*, meaning “manner, mode, following, school of thought,” or, literally, “way” or “road.” However, a common mistake, dating back even to the medieval period, was to derive the word from the Latin verb *secare* (“to cut”), thus giving the idea of a sect as something that breaks off or branches off from a main group.<sup>5</sup> Medieval Christians often applied the term “sect” to denote schismatics, and therefore heretics. In other words, they used it to describe those who were perceived to have deviated from true Christianity in the eyes of whatever body was making the accusation of schism. As a modern term, the popular notion of sectarianism has retained something of this polemical and pejorative sense, though academic definitions of sectarianism attempt, with varying degrees of success, to define sectarianism in a more neutral fashion. Also noteworthy is how both of the connotations of sect (as a subgroup of a religious or philosophical system, and usually as an offshoot of a larger group) inform the ways that term is understood. In fact, many academic definitions of “sect” and “sectarianism” have not deviated far from these core usages, though they have offered some important insights along the way.

Contemporary academic discussions about sectarianism begin with one of the founders of modern sociology, the German intellectual Karl Emil Maximilian (“Max”) Weber (d. 1920). Weber interested himself in the study of human social behavior, its origins and development, organizations and institutions. As an aspect of these concerns, he offered the first sociological characterization of a sect, which he contrasted with the institution of the church. Weber was interested in these institutions insofar as they provided ideal types, highlighting certain contrasting features of human social organization for the purposes of comparison.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, Weber was interested in refuting Marx’s contention that social institutions were rooted in the economic substructure of society, aiming to show that religion could operate as an independent variable in

<sup>5</sup> [www.etymonline.com/word/sect#etymonline\\_v\\_23088](http://www.etymonline.com/word/sect#etymonline_v_23088).

<sup>6</sup> Swatos, “Weber or Troeltsch?” 131.

history.<sup>7</sup> For Weber, churches had certain features such as professional priesthoods, dogmas and rites, claims to universal domination; and they were compulsory organizations, meaning that the church's claims to truth went beyond individuals, compelling the church to discipline those who deviated from it.<sup>8</sup> This last point on the mode of membership provided for one of the main differences between churches and sects: people were born into churches, but they chose to be part of sects. This mode of membership, thereby, affected how a person acted in relation to the institution, as the church remained a "compulsory association for the administration of grace," while the sect offered a "voluntary association for religiously qualified persons."<sup>9</sup> Sects thus rejected the institutionalized grace of the church for the personal salvation offered by the sect. This meant that membership in the sect required specific actions, and unqualified members were removed from the group.<sup>10</sup> Weber also claimed that sects resisted hierarchies while churches maintained hierarchies of persons who dispensed grace, and that sects were generally apolitical, desiring to be left alone, in contrast to churches that remained tied to the world.<sup>11</sup>

Weber's ideas were taken up and elaborated upon by one of his colleagues, another German intellectual, Ernst Troeltsch (d. 1923). As a theologian, Troeltsch hoped to relate different kinds of religious experience to various kinds of social teachings, and to thereby discover a solution to the problems facing Christians in the modern era. He thus emphasized the social behavior of churches and sects over the particular forms of social organization that they maintained.<sup>12</sup> Churches, he argued, tended to accommodate the state, becoming in the process associated with the ruling classes, and thus part of the social order.<sup>13</sup> This willingness to compromise with the world was predicated on the church's presumed ability to remain sanctified despite individual inadequacies. Thus, the sanctity of the church superseded the individual pieties of the persons that comprised it. Sects, on the other hand, aspired toward inward perfection and personal fellowship, treating the wider society sometimes with indifference and tolerance, but often with protest or open hostility. Indeed, for Troeltsch the very values of the sect existed as a remonstrance of those of the wider society. For this reason, they tended to break from the church, and to exist among the lower classes of society and those who did not get on well with the state. For sect members, attainment of salvation existed

<sup>7</sup> Coleman, "Church-Sect Typology and Organizational Precariousness," 55.

<sup>8</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1164.

<sup>9</sup> Weber, *From Max Weber*, 314.

<sup>10</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1204–5.

<sup>11</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1208.

<sup>12</sup> Swatos, "Weber or Troeltsch?" 133.

<sup>13</sup> Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 331ff.



in tension with secular interests and institutions. Thus, for Troeltsch, the church represented an institution of grace that was enmeshed in the wider world of politics and society, while the sect presented a smaller, voluntary group that stressed individual, demonstrated ethical behavior apart from the world.

Weber and Troeltsch's typologies were heavily invested in the language and history of Christianity. They posited sects as voluntary, apolitical groups that existed in tension with their universalist parent groups, the church. Not only did their typologies draw explicitly from the history of the Catholic/Protestant splits in Europe, but both offered less a definition of church and sect, and more an attempt to establish these ideals as heuristic tools that would illuminate certain features of human social organization through comparison. Weber's aim in developing the typology was precisely to understand why capitalism and the idea of secular democracy seemed to develop only among Protestant Christians. For his part, Troeltsch hoped to find an answer to the problem of the Christian's relation to the modern world, concluding that because of its relation to society at large, the church offered the better solution.

Weber and Troeltsch's church-sect typology was itself then picked up by an American theologian, Helmut Richard Niebuhr (d. 1962), who treated churches and sects as poles on a continuum, rather than as distinct categories. Niebuhr's insight was to show how sects tended to become more church-like with time. As new generations populated the sects, and as their ways became fixed, "the original impetus to reject the norms and activities of the dominant society" gave way to acceptance.<sup>14</sup> Following Niebuhr, several contemporary sociologists and scholars of religion have offered elaborations of the church-sect typology, many of which developed it into full-fledged definitions of various church or sect-types, creating what has been called "quasi-evaluative" devices.<sup>15</sup> Thus, for example, Becker expanded the church-sect model to include denominations and ecclesia.<sup>16</sup> Yinger enlarged Becker's model even further, positing six types (cult, sect, established sect, class church/denomination, ecclesia, and universal church) and sub-typing sects by their accepting, avoiding, or aggressive relationship to the wider society.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Johnson classified religious groups according to their state of tension with their social

<sup>14</sup> Swatos, "Weber or Troeltsch?" 134; Dawson, "Creating 'Cult' Typologies," 367; see also Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*.

<sup>15</sup> Swatos, "Weber or Troeltsch?" 134–35.

<sup>16</sup> Becker, *Systematic Sociology*, 114–18; Becker, "Sacred and Secular Societies," 362–76; Swatos, "Weber or Troeltsch?" 135.

<sup>17</sup> Yinger, *Religion and the Struggle for Power*, 18–23; Yinger, *Religion, Society and the Individual*, 142–45.



environment.<sup>18</sup> Stark and Bainbridge defined churches as conventional religious organizations, sects as deviant religious organization with traditional beliefs and practices, and cults as deviant religious organization with novel beliefs and practices.<sup>19</sup> Opting for visual models, Robertson and Gustafson provided two-by-two tables, the cells of which offered elaborations on the church and sect-types using modified Troeltschian criteria,<sup>20</sup> while Swatos afforded a more elaborate table with five types.<sup>21</sup> Wilson, arguing along classic Weberian lines that religious groups should be understood according to their soteriological function, classed several types of sects according to their “deviant” responses to the world.<sup>22</sup> Importantly, Wilson rejected the idea that sects must be set against a church. Rather, they may be arrayed against “secular society” as a kind of protest movement.<sup>23</sup> Baumgarten similarly viewed sects primarily as protest groups, emphasizing the process of boundary creating by defining a sect as “a voluntary association of protest, which utilizes boundary marking mechanisms – the social means of differentiating between insiders and outsiders – to distinguish between its own members and those otherwise normally regarded as belonging to the same national or religious entity.”<sup>24</sup> As becomes clear from a brief survey of the various sociologists and religious studies scholars who developed the Weber/Troeltsch/Niebuhr church-sect and later, cult typology, the notions of “sect” and “sectarianism” admit varying degrees of subtlety, and may be differentiated from other kinds of groups according to an array of diverse criteria. Broadly speaking, however, there is consensus among them that a sect is “a group that has separated to some degree from a parent body, and has boundary markers to indicate its separate identity.”<sup>25</sup>

Given this broad consensus among certain “Western” academics, it is worth asking how applicable their conceptualizations of “sect” and “sectarianism” might be for the study of Muslim *firqā*. Cook has argued that Weber’s notion of church-sect is, in fact, not very useful when carried over into an Islamic context. For one, Islamic sectarianism proper was first and foremost a response to religio-political developments after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad, while Weber and Troeltsch (among others) characterized sects as apolitical.<sup>26</sup> Secondly, membership in what might

<sup>18</sup> Johnson, “On Church and Sect,” 542; Stark and Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion*, 23.

<sup>19</sup> Stark and Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion*, 124.

<sup>20</sup> Robertson, *The Sociological Interpretation of Religion*, 122–28; Gustafson, “UO-US-PS-PO,” 64–68; Gustafson, “Exegesis on the Gospel according to St. Max,” 12–25.

<sup>21</sup> Swatos, “Monopolism, Pluralism, Acceptance, and Rejection,” 174–85 (esp. figure 1 on 177); see also Wallis, “Scientology,” 98.

<sup>22</sup> Wilson, *Religious Sects*, 36–40. <sup>23</sup> Wilson, *Religious Sects*, 26–27.

<sup>24</sup> Baumgarten, *The Flourishing of Jewish Sects in the Maccabean Era*, 7.

<sup>25</sup> Collins, *Scriptures and Sectarianism*, 177. <sup>26</sup> Cook, “Weber and Islamic Sects,” 276.

be considered a Muslim sect, notably the Shi'ites, but also the Ibāḍiyya, is not any less voluntary than that of other Muslim groups. And lastly, Shi'ites possess far more hierarchical characteristics than their Sunni counterparts, making them more properly the candidates for the Weberian status of "church" than the Sunnis, upon whom Weber actually bestowed the designation.<sup>27</sup> Given these problems, Cook concludes that "Weber is neither so obviously right, nor so interestingly wrong, as to provide a useful starting-point for our own attempts to understand the peculiar groups we know as Islamic sects."<sup>28</sup>

Similarly, many of the definitions of sects and sectarianism that follow Weber turn out to be fundamentally problematic when applied to the Islamic context. One of the main issues with them revolves around their notions of church, denomination, or ecclesia as somehow set against sects and cults. While a case could be made for treating Shi'ites and, perhaps more appropriately, Khārijites as sects in the Weberian-Troeltschian vein, there is no good candidate for what in the early Islamic period might qualify as the church, denomination, or ecclesia from which they separated. Something called the "Sunni" branch of Islam cannot be said to have existed before the third/ninth century (at the earliest), and the pro-'Uthmān groups of the initial period (mainly the Umayyads) constituted no majority, nor were they as firmly established in their rule as they might have liked to have been. Certainly, the Umayyads attempted to make themselves into the undisputed, popular, religious authorities of early Islamdom, but such attempts failed, as did the later 'Abbāsīd efforts to do the same. At best, these early groups might simply qualify as other Muslim sects. None of them actually meet the requirements for "churches" or parent groups.

Even Wilson's definition of sect, which helpfully leaves aside overt notions of "church," nonetheless posits sects as protest movements (and "deviant" ones at that) to be measured against the societies in which they are located. In effect, Wilson simply substitutes "society" for "church" as the normative baseline against which sects may be classed. This is not to say that what early Muslims later dubbed *fīraq* were not protest movements within the midst of their societies. Indeed, many of the *fīraq* could be described as protest or revolutionary movements. Nevertheless, the yardstick for measuring protest need not be a real or imagined universal such as church/denomination/ecclesia or "society." Defining sects as "deviant" in relation to some universal, in fact, subtly replicates the historical situation of the early Christian church, revealing it to be hiding under such definitions all along.

<sup>27</sup> Cook, "Weber and Islamic Sects," 277.    <sup>28</sup> Cook, "Weber and Islamic Sects," 278.

The early Islamic situation seems, rather, to be one of several groups competing for primacy, and mutually protesting, or actively rebelling against each other. There is no stable center, no “parent group,” or normative society from which these groups sprung and against which they defined themselves. Moreover, while many of the *firq* were, at some point and to a certain degree, voluntary, in the heavily tribalized societies of early Islamic period voluntarism quickly elided with tribal association such that sect and tribal affiliation can frequently be correlated. And while most of the groups that later get described as *firq* initially arose in protest against the Umayyads, by the ‘Abbāsid era one of them (i.e. the Murji’ites) abandoned any vestige of revolutionary protest to be eventually absorbed into the emerging Sunni consensus. In other words, the analytic church-sect-cult categories discussed above will not be much help in characterizing early Islamic sectarianism.

But what of the medieval and early modern periods? Sedgwick has argued that in the absence of an established church among Muslims, researchers might look to “general mores,” the “general sociocultural environment,” as well as a conventional “body of doctrine,” which is “largely under the control of bodies which may be termed denominations.”<sup>29</sup> Perhaps, following Sedgwick, it is possible to speak of Shi’ism, Sunnism, or Ibāḍism, broadly, as denominations, especially after the third/ninth century when such groups seem to have accumulated enough institutional weight in their respective locales to control bodies of doctrine, and to significantly influence their general sociocultural environments. His reminder (à la Niebuhr) that sectarian groups may become more like denominations with time remains an important one, allowing the researcher to examine the Islamic world as a patchwork of sociocultural environments, each with the potential to sustain “general mores” and normative bodies of doctrine within them (and thus, simultaneously containing the potential for more sects to arise within them).

The question, however, remains whether or not it is necessary or especially useful to employ these classificatory terms (“sect” and “denomination”) to track development within the same Muslim group.<sup>30</sup> Given that the particularism of the categories renders them virtually useless as explanatory devices for the earliest Islamic periods, it

<sup>29</sup> Sedgwick, “Sects in the Islamic World,” 197.

<sup>30</sup> In some cases (such as particularly technical or specialized studies), the answer might be affirmative. However, in an introductory work on Muslim sects and schools, shifting descriptors mid-chapter seems a bit like needless classificatory gymnastics. This suspicion is confirmed by noticing that Hodgson argues for the Shi’a becoming “sectarian” precisely at the moment (i.e. third/ninth century) when Sedgwick might consider them as moving toward becoming a “denomination.” See Hodgson, “How Did the Early Shi’a Become Sectarian?” 8ff.

is hard to see how they might be introduced mid-stream as helpful descriptors for groups in the classical to late medieval eras. More to the point, the overt usage of these categories remains unnecessary insofar as the telling of a given *firqa*'s history implicitly explains how it became more accepted in such-and-such a place and time (i.e. less like a sect in tension with its social environment), and how it then established more "institutions" (thus becoming less "voluntary," and more like what Sedgwick calls a denomination). In the end, Sedgwick's categories are helpful for thinking about sects in the contemporary Islamic world (which are his core concern), but the particularism of the sect-denomination typology becomes needlessly burdensome when marshaled to tell the broader story of Muslim sects and schools.

Turning to the ways that early Muslims conceptualized the religious subgroups in their midst, it is noteworthy that they tend not to use binary, tertiary, or relational terminology ("church-sect-cult" or "sect-denomination"), but rather to abstract the main groups using a singular concept. Thus, the terms *firqal/firaq*, *niḥla/niḥal*, *madhhab/madhāhib*, and later *ṭā'ifa/ṭawā'if* tend to evenly designate Shi'ites, Khārijites, Murji'ites, Mu'tazilites, as well as those later known under the rubric of Sunnis.<sup>31</sup> This is not to say that individual Muslim authors treated these groups as equally legitimate (they most certainly did not), but merely to point out that the conceptual schema underlying the Muslim imaginary of sectarianism tended to deploy one notion to describe various kinds of groups while Christian and later "Western"/academic notions seem to replicate what is at its base a dualistic or tripartite model. Even when medieval Muslim authors designated one group as superior to the others, they tended to cite the Prophetic *ḥadīth* that mentioned the "saved *firqa*" (*al-firqa al-nājiyya*) among the other erring *firaq*. In other words, Muslims cast all of these groups as *firqas*, be they "saved" or not.

It would seem, then, that the terminology of church-sect-cult would not be of much use in describing the Muslims' situation. And yet, we are left with few acceptable English replacements: we could avoid the language of sect altogether, describing Shi'ism, Khārijism, Sunnism, and so on, as communal groups, identifications, or affiliations.<sup>32</sup> Alternately, we might try to recover the term "sect" as somehow the equivalent of *firqa*, *niḥla*, and so forth. Neither option is perfect, and so, this work will attempt a little of both, approaching Muslim sectarianism as a kind of

<sup>31</sup> The term *milla/milal* tended to denote, following the qur'anic usage (2:14–15; 7:86–87; 14:16; 18:19–20), divisions among discrete religious traditions, such as between Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and Muslims.

<sup>32</sup> For example, see Haider, whose introduction to *Shi'ī Islam* (1–11) avoids the language of sect and sectarianism in favor of "communal group."

affiliation, but also reappropriating the term “sect” as reflecting its accurate Latin meaning “manner, mode, following, way” or “road” to designate the primary ways, manners, and modes by which groups of Muslims differed over the religio-political succession to Muḥammad. In this sense, “sect” refers to those groups that *differed with each other* rather than with some “parent group” or normative society. Specifically, it refers to the actual Shi‘ites, Khārijites, and the constellation of groups that, much later, became subsumed under the heading of the Sunnis. And as with the Islamic usage of *fīraq*, and so on, this work will consistently refer to these groups as “sects” at all stages of their development, even though stricter sociological taxonomy might classify them at some point in their history as having become “denominations.”

Set alongside of these groups are those which I will designate schools of thought: mainly the Murji‘ites and Mu‘tazilites. This work has chosen to use a different term to describe these groups, in part, because the term “sect” does not really do them justice. Their manner of difference was not religio-political per se, but more properly philosophical-theological, and thus they turn out to be dissimilar enough from their Shi‘ite, Khārijite, and Sunni counterparts to warrant, in my estimation, another descriptor. Moreover, the idea of a school of thought is familiar to students trained in the “Western”/academic tradition (e.g. the school of Athens) to approximate the extent that *fīraq* such as the Murji‘ites and Mu‘tazilites (among others) referred to groups set off by their commitments to primarily intellectual endeavors, as opposed to revolutionary ones. Admittedly, the resulting “Muslim sects and schools” is a bit unwieldy, and it is to be hoped that the line between “sect” and “school” would remain comfortably hazy.

Despite the serious shortcoming of church-sect typologies for the study of Muslim sects and schools, there remain some elements of these theories that might be rescued. First, Weber and later Wilson approached religion in terms of its function, highlighting how religious groups like churches and sects offered distinctive paths to salvation. They thereby distinguished sects by their soteriological responses to the world, meaning that they were interested in the ways that sectarian answers to the question “what should we do to be saved?” implied certain kinds of relations to their social environment.<sup>33</sup> While I do not wish to reduce religion or sectarianism to its function alone, I do hold that the idea of salvation remains a central leitmotif to what I am calling Muslim sects and schools, and that soteriology might provide an important means to distinguish between them.

<sup>33</sup> Dawson, “Creating ‘Cult’ Typologies,” 366.

Second, returning in some senses to Weber's notion of the "mode of membership" in a church or sect, it is possible to see past his particular characterizations of membership toward the more general question of how human beings participate in religious groups and subgroups. More recent definitions of sectarianism view it as both a practice and a discourse,<sup>34</sup> calling attention to how sectarian affiliation must be "activated" if it is to move from being passive or banal to being assertive or even aggressive.<sup>35</sup> These definitions point to the importance of external influences, economics, shifting notions of modernity and nationalism, and to history, and myths and symbols as factors that create and sustain sectarianism in modern contexts.<sup>36</sup> They challenge researchers to move away from treating sectarianism as a thing-in-itself (and therefore from relying on taxonomies of church-sect-cult types) and back to sectarianism as a way of doing things, as a mode of being in the world, and as a discourse of identification.

### **A Narrative-Identification Approach to Muslim Sects and Schools**

How, then, to best study Muslim sects and schools? If not Weberian/Troeltschian models, then what other approaches, models, and theories might assist the study of Islamic sectarianism? The answers to these questions will depend, in large part, on how the notions of sect, school, and religious difference are conceptualized. Following recent trends in the study of sectarianism, this study will treat Muslim sects and schools, in the broadest sense, as affiliations that Muslims hold. Strongly associated with these affiliations are the various institutions that perpetuate them (insofar as these institutions can be said to be accumulated products and reflections of particular kinds of Muslim sect/school identifications).<sup>37</sup> And because Muslim sects and schools remain indelibly tied to the Muslims who articulate and constitute them, sectarian modes of identification turn out to be remarkably unstable. After all, human modes of self-identification are often situation specific, meaning that human beings identify themselves differently depending on their situation. The fact that a person identifies as a Sunni or Shi'ite may or may not be relevant at any given moment, depending on the

<sup>34</sup> Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism*, 6; see also Weiss, *In the Shadow of Sectarianism*, 13.

<sup>35</sup> Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 25ff.

<sup>36</sup> Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism*, 6–7; Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 10–23.

<sup>37</sup> See Weiss, *In the Shadow of Sectarianism*, 13ff.; Jokiranta, *Social Identity and Sectarianism in the Qumran Movement*, 77ff.; Potter, *Sectarian Politics in the Persian Gulf*, 2–3; on the limits of the concept of "identity," see Brubaker and Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity,'" 1–47.

circumstances. For example, while having coffee with peers in a café in Baghdad, the notion that a person is a Shi'ite (or Sunni) may fade into the background, while the issue of said person's favorite soccer team, oud player, or political stance may take over. This does not mean, of course, that the person has stopped *being* a Shi'ite, but rather that the importance of such an affiliation has ceased to become a significant factor of their being in those moments, and thus, from the perspective of social science research, the person's Shi'ism has temporarily ceased to be relevant. However, when the month of Muḥarram nears, this same person's Shi'ism may come to the fore (and thus return as an object of interest to social science researchers) as she remembers al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī's martyrdom at Karbala in the local mosque or Ḥusayniyya. In fact, depending on the circumstances, the month of Muḥarram may cause the person's Shi'ism to become more relevant than it was previously. Thus, and as a reflection of the human beings who hold them, intra-religious differences are not fixed, immutable, or eternal, but constantly shifting, as is their salience in any given situation.

Additionally, this situation-specific nature of sect/school identification offers clues to another aspect of sectarianism and difference, namely, its connection to other elements of our personhood both as individuals and collectives. We sometimes think of our identities as something intensely personal, yet who we "are" also contains elements that are imminently communal. Thus, a person might be a Muslim, a Sunni Muslim to be more precise, and also an American of Palestinian descent, a Democrat, middle class, a veteran, an electrical engineer, a Mason, a University of Virginia graduate, a UVA Cavaliers fan, an archer, a father, husband, brother, and neighbor. Seeing sect-affiliation in relation to "commonality, connectedness and groupness"<sup>38</sup> renders it, following Abdul Jabbar, "a loose cultural designation" that differentiates one group affiliation from another using "religious terms."<sup>39</sup> It also reminds us that sect/school identification is but one aspect of a larger, and malleable, patchwork of individual and group affiliations, and that it must be approached as tangled up with these other kinds of identifications.

How, then, to study an unstable affiliation that is but one stand among many possible identifications? In this regard, the recent conversations among scholars of sociology, psychology, anthropology, philosophy, and literary criticism as to how human beings use narrative to form identities and interpret their experiences may prove useful. In particular, the work of Margaret Somers captures some of the general insights of this

<sup>38</sup> Brubaker and Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity,'" 19–21.

<sup>39</sup> Abdul Jabbar, *The Shi'ite Movement in Iraq*, 33–35.



line of inquiry. Somers builds on the idea that “it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities.” That is to say, human beings find themselves “emplotted” in the midst of small and large-scale narratives, relating to others as “characters” within those narratives, and navigating the roles that they choose to play with reference to the underlying “themes” and “plots” of such narratives. Such narratives feed into the individual and group identifications of human beings, allowing them to make sense of past, present, and future events through the lenses of the narratives in which they are emplotted.<sup>40</sup> Generally speaking, Somers argues for the idea that “all of us come to be who we are (however ephemeral, multiple, and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives rarely of our own making.”<sup>41</sup>

Adapting Somers’ views of narrative identity to the study of Muslims sects and schools (and substituting à la Brubaker and Cooper the notion of “identity” for the more precise concept of “identification”), then, treats sect/school affiliations one particular cluster of narratives among and related to many others in which human beings find themselves emplotted.<sup>42</sup> Such an approach has much to commend it. First, it avoids essentializing sect and school affiliations by recognizing them as products of human beings: products that accumulate, change, and develop – even break down – over time, and in accordance with the particular situations in which people employ (or forget) them. Secondly, it allows for human agency within the social context of group affiliation,<sup>43</sup> viewing sect/school actors as both participating in a drama that goes beyond their individual

<sup>40</sup> Somers, “The Narrative Constitution of Identity,” 613–14.

<sup>41</sup> Somers, “The Narrative Constitution of Identity,” 606.

<sup>42</sup> See the criticism of Somers’s approach in Brubaker and Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity,’” 11–12.

<sup>43</sup> It is mainly for this reason that I find Somers’s approach to narrative identity far more useful to the study of sectarianism than the notion of the “myth-symbol complex” (see Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds*, 25; Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 17). Though very similar to the idea of narrative identity (the myth-symbol complex is ultimately a kind of narrative), Kaufman tends to treat myth-symbol complexes as mostly static narratives that exert an almost irresistible influence over their (mostly passive) consumers. He does not adequately explain, for example, how “the existence, status and security of the groups” comes to depend on “the status of group symbols” (25). Similarly, he tends to reserve agency for “leaders” who “manipulate . . . symbols for dubious or selfish purposes,” casting the followers of these leaders as simple dupes, or for mass movements in which the relation of group to symbol is obscure. The narrative-identification approach, on the other hand, highlights how actors participate (both actively and passively) in the narratives of sect and school. Somers’s approach thus comes closer (à la Asad, “Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,” 16) to treating people as participants in sectarianism as a discursive tradition.

selves, but also manipulating that drama through their participation in it.<sup>44</sup> Third, it recognizes sect/school identifications as part of the multiple, intersecting, and often competing identifications that constitute a person or social entity (i.e. that a person or group will be involved in several narratives of being, all of which might affect each other to varying degrees). Viewing sect/school affiliation as a kind of narrative identification thus permits the researcher of Muslim sects and schools to inquire after the narratives, themes, plots, institutions, and characters that make up – collectively – what we consider to be any given *firqa* at any given moment. In this way, it provides a potent methodology for the historical study of Muslim sects and schools. Taking a narrative-identification approach to the study of Muslim sects and schools treats the question of how Muslims create, acquire, maintain, and manipulate their communal affiliations as a question of how the master narratives of Muslim sects and schools initially develop, how subsequent Muslims began to emplot themselves or found themselves emplotted in such narratives, and what such emplotments may have meant for them at the time. It also pays attention to the ways that the narratives of sect/school identifications accumulated over time, became more refined, perpetuated themselves through institutions, frequently fragmented into subsects and schools, and sometimes disappeared altogether.

With the narrative-identification approach to Muslim sects and schools as the theoretical model guiding this book, several methodological questions remain to be addressed, starting with which sect and schools will be included in it, and which will be excluded. The answer to this question will ultimately guide us toward a more precise definition of sect and philosophical-theological school. More immediately, the answer turns out to be cautiously straightforward. At a relatively early period, medieval Muslim heresiographers established the principal divisions among Muslims, and for the most part these principal divisions remained the broad categories by which Muslims organized taxonomies of Muslim *firq*. Although the numbers of “mother sects” range from four in the writings of al-Nawbakhtī and al-Muqaddasī to ten in al-Ash‘arī, Muslim heresiographers tended to agree that the *khawwārij* (the Khārijites), *shī‘a* (Shi‘ites), *mu‘tazila* (Mu‘tazilites), and *murji‘a* (Murji‘ites) were four of

<sup>44</sup> Somers recognizes several dimensions of narrativity, notably what she calls “ontological narratives” and “public narratives” (“The Narrative Constitution of Identity,” 618–19). This sensitivity to the individual and collective aspects of narrativity mirrors in some ways the concerns of Brubaker and Cooper in specifying modes of identification/self-understanding and commonality, connectedness, and groupness (Brubaker and Cooper, “Beyond ‘Identity,’” 14–21).

them.<sup>45</sup> Heresiographers that break the *fīraq al-umma* into five or more usually include, using a variety of different monikers, the *ahl al-sunna* (Sunnis) – with the exception of al-Ash‘arī, who wrote before something called “Sunnism” could be said to have existed.<sup>46</sup> Many heresiographers who numbered the divisions of the *umma* beyond five (i.e. al-Khwārizmī, Abū al-Ma‘ālī, and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī) cast the *mujabbira* (Determinists), *mushabbiha* (Anthropomorphists), Karrāmiyya, and Ṣūfis (mystics) as separate *fīraq*.<sup>47</sup> However, it could be argued that most of those who held “determinist” or “anthropomorphic” views, along with those known as the Karrāmiyya, could all be rightly regarded in the broad sense as some variation of Sunni, however “proto” or distant. This is how al-Shahrastānī, in fact, speaks about them despite the fact that he, too, classes these groups not as Sunnis but as either *ṣifāṭiyya* (Attributists) or *jabriyya* (Determinists).<sup>48</sup> Similarly, it could be argued that Sufism is not a sect or school at all, but the mystical dimension of Islamic life, and one that often cut across sectarian boundaries. Thus, we are left with five main sects or schools, namely, the Khārijites, Shī‘ites, Murji‘ites, Mu‘tazilites, and Sunnis, which will form the main sect/school divisions to be investigated in this book.

Admittedly, there are problems with following medieval Muslim heresiographers in their organization of the Muslim *fīraq* into five. One of the main issues, of course, is that some groups are left out of that schema, while others do not fit it exactly. For example, the abovementioned *mujabbira* (Determinists), *mushabbiha* (Anthropomorphists), and Karrāmiyya sit but awkwardly classed among the Sunnis. It is difficult to find a “place” for these groups within the fivefold *fīraq* schema.

So too, the various Sufi personalities and orders (*ṭarīqāt*) that developed in the medieval Islamic world do not fit easily into the schema, and they will not be formally included in this work. However, insofar as some of these mystical orders did have a profound effect on the ways that some sectarian groups articulated their narratives, then they will be included in the discussion (as is the case with Haji Bektāsh Velī and the Bektāshiyya

<sup>45</sup> al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-Taqaṣīm fī Ma‘rifat al-Taqaṣīm*, 38; al-Nawbakhtī, *Kitāb Fīraq al-Shī‘a*, 15.

<sup>46</sup> Van Ess, *Frühe Mu‘tazilitische Häresiographie*, 27–28 (Pseudo-Nāshī’); al-Khayyāt, *Kitāb al-Intiṣār*, 101 (quoting Ibn al-Rawandī); al-Mas‘ūdī, *al-Tanbīh wa’l-Ashraf*, 358; Sayyid, *Faḍl al-I‘tizāl*, 164 (al-Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār); Abū Hayyān al-Tawhīdī, *Kitāb al-Imtā’ wa’l-Mu‘anasa*, 2:9; Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Faṣl*, 1:368; al-Ash‘arī, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, 1:65.

<sup>47</sup> al-Khwārizmī, *Mafātiḥ al-‘Ulūm*, 24–32; Abū al-Ma‘ālī, *Bayān al-Adyān*, 26; al-Rāzī, *I‘tiqādāt Fīraq al-Muslimīn wa’l-Mushrikīn*, 13–20. On al-Shahrastānī and Abū Tammām, who fix the number of mother-sects at seven, see Gaiser, “Satan’s Seven Specious Arguments,” 191–93.

<sup>48</sup> al-Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-Milal wa’l-Niḥal*, 103–4, 107.

Sufi order, or Shah Ismā'īl and the Ṣafawīyya/Ṣafaviyya order). Nevertheless, and despite the fact that Abū al-Ma'ālī and Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī include the “Ṣūfiyya” in their list of *firq al-umma*, most other medieval and modern Islamic authors do not consider the Sufi *ṭarīqāt* to be something akin to the Khārijites, Shi'a, Murji'a, Mu'tazila, or Ahl al-Sunna. Of course, many Sufi groups do assert a sectarian affiliation (i.e. they identify with the “Sunni” or “Shi'ite” narrative), or, alternately, they claim access to religious insights that move human consciousness beyond what they consider to be the “surface” (*ẓāhir*) designations of sectarianism. However interesting these subjects may be, a work of this size can offer but limited comments.

Similarly, the legal “schools” (*madhāhib*) will not be treated with any depth, as they, too, are not usually considered *firq*. As with the Sufi orders, however, there are also some exceptions to this rule. For example, the heresiographer Abū al-Ma'ālī's categorization of the Sunnis subdivides them into legal schools, as does the Ibādī heresiographer al-Qalhātī, who treats the separate Sunni legal *madhāhib* as discrete *firq*.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, the legal schools are not the same kind of institutions as the five *firq*, though they may share some profound similarities, and they sometimes acted as a sect or theological school might. One reason for the institutional difference between the legal *madhāhib* and the *firq* can be traced to the development of Sunnism as an expansive and inclusive path that made room for a wide variety of groups. As it slowly became ascendant, Sunnism more and more became affiliated with several of the main legal schools. In this way, and like the Sufi orders, the legal schools often claimed a sectarian affiliation by identifying with specific sectarian narrative. Thus, the Mālikī, Shāfi'ī, Ḥanbalī, and Ḥanafī legal schools are usually considered “Sunni,” though it is noteworthy that the eponym of the Ḥanafī legal school, Abū Ḥanīfa, was an important early Murji'ite while the so-called Ja'farī legal school is identified with Ithnā-'Asharī Shi'ism. The Ibādīyya, too, boast a legal school, claiming that it predates all the others. Legal schools, then, are not here treated as sectarian per se, but reflect the influences of the sect and philosophical-theological orientations within which they developed. It must be remembered, however, that the line dividing a legal *madhhab* from a sectarian or theological *madhhab* is far from clear (especially in the developing stages of Sunnism), and that the legal *madhhabs* often behaved in ways similar to their sectarian coreligionists (e.g. the Ḥanbalīs in Baghdad).

A more glaring problem with employing the fivefold division of the *umma* as an organizing concept for the book is how this schema makes the

<sup>49</sup> Abū al-Ma'ālī, *Bayān al-Adyān*, 26; al-Qalhātī, *al-Kashf wa'l-Bayān*, 2:373–91.

divisions among Muslims seem more solid and real than was, perhaps, the case. This is directly contrary to what a narrative-identity approach to Muslim sects and schools hopes to emphasize: namely, that sect identifications are far more contingent and fluid than is usually assumed. There are few avenues around this obstacle, however, as a book on Muslim divisions must address the main Muslim *firqā*, and it must do so in a relatively succinct fashion. Nevertheless, and to reemphasize the provisional nature of sect identifications, I will close the work with a chapter on sectarian relations and ambiguities. Chapter 7 will be devoted to the issue of sect and school affiliation and relations between communal groups, and will delve into theoretical definitional problems associated with the study of Islamic sectarianism. It is hoped that Chapter 7 might mitigate some of the potential problems caused by adhering to a rigid fivefold characterization of the *umma*'s divisions.

Having decided, following most though not all of the medieval Muslim heresiographers, to exclude Sufi orders and legal schools and focus on the so-called fivefold division of Muslim sects and schools, we have arrived at a point where we may inquire into a more precise working definition of "sect and school." If, as I have posited above, sect/school affiliation is a kind of identification, and identification is itself a process in which human beings emplot themselves in certain kinds of narratives, then our inquiry begins at the moments of divergence that created distinct kinds of narratives, or clusters of narratives, into which Muslims began to emplot themselves. It continues through how these narratives lead to the creation of discrete sects and schools, or what Muslims called *firqā* (as well as *niḥal*, *ṭawā'if*, or *madhāhib*). A *firqā*, or sect/school, then, may be defined as participatory narrative of intra-religious difference that accretes institutionalized forms through the collective weight of the Muslims who choose to emplot themselves within it. In other words, Muslim sects and schools are here treated as accumulating stories, or grand or master narratives, in which Muslims partake, especially insofar as these narratives stake out particularized claims to religious distinctiveness.<sup>50</sup> Whatever unique institutional forms might arise from this participation (e.g. rituals of mourning, or theories of legitimate governance) are products of the human involvement in and elaboration of these stories.

As narratives, sect/school stories possess all of the characteristics of a narrative, which is to say that they develop their own themes, plots, characters, and so on. From a more general perspective, however, it is the

<sup>50</sup> This view toward Muslim sects and schools captures, I believe, what Makdisi (*The Culture of Sectarianism*, 6) meant when he claimed that sectarianism was both a practice and a discourse.

connection between the theme of salvation and the plot of truth preservation that distinguishes sect/school narratives from other kinds of identification narratives. In other words, a common theme among the various sects and schools is that they claim to offer a means to achieve perfection and/or salvation to their followers. Simultaneously, the “plot” of the sect/school story, writ large, is the preservation of this distinctive soteriology against the illegitimate forces that would seek to destroy, degrade, or forget those truths, and thus lead the community into damnation. And because the story itself is one of perfection/salvation by a particular group, participation in the sect/school story, adoption of its worldview, practicing of its rituals, and so on, can become highly significant, even to the point where people might be willing to die for it.

Recognizing the centrality of soteriological themes, combined with the plot of truth preservation, allows us to recognize when a religious tendency or inclination moves on to become sectarian. For example, holding that ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, the Prophet Muḥammad’s cousin, was the rightful successor to Muḥammad was a belief held by those who came to be known as the partisans or supporters (*shī’a*) of ‘Alī. While this group and its convictions formed the nucleus of what would eventually become Shi’ism, it cannot be said that the earliest Shi’a constituted a sect. However, when this very same conviction (i.e. that ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib or other members of the Prophet’s family were the rightful and true successors to Muḥammad) was held to effect the fate of individual souls on the Day of Judgment, then something called Shi’ism (as a sectarian tendency among Muslims) could be said to be present.

The presence of soteriological themes also permits us to distinguish sectarian narrative identifications from other kinds of narrative identifications and to navigate our way toward understanding how sect/school narrative affiliations might bleed into other kinds of identifications. For example, economic categories (being “rich,” “poor,” “middle class,” etc.) might not become tied to sectarian narratives unless real or perceived inequities begin to consistently impinge on a group of people who cleave to a particular narrative of sectarian salvation. If this happens, then economic disparity and class difference may become understood as persecution, threat, or harassment by hostile sectarian others. Likewise, political, national, or ethnic narratives, which we are accustomed to thinking of as separate in some senses from “religious” narratives (and thus separate from the issue of perfection/salvation), can, in fact, be linked through the theme of perfection/salvation. Thus, a political party may offer a vision of limited earthly salvation (e.g. Obama’s “Change We Can Believe In” and “Hope”; Trump’s “Make America Great Again”). However, by our definition of sectarianism this kind of political narrative

will remain merely partisan, becoming sectarian only when a more ultimate kind of salvation is linked to membership in the truth-preserving party (as when certain American Christian groups create narratives in which Obama figures as the anti-Christ, or Trump appears as a savior figure).

The ability to view religious sect/school identifications as sometimes merging with political identifications offers a particular advantage to the study of Muslim sects and schools. In several periods of Islamic history, and especially in the early medieval Islamic period, political and religious (here meaning “ultimate” or “other worldly”) perfection/salvation tended to be elided, which is to say that Muslims looked for perfection in this world as well as the next, and tended to see the two as profoundly connected. Thus, early expressions of Islamic sectarianism may be described as revolving around what we would consider to be both “religious” and “political” themes of salvation. This does not mean, though, that we cannot distinguish, however artificially, between the two. What we might think of as “political” narratives in the medieval Muslim period, narratives involving righteous or tyrannical caliphs, legitimate or unlawful violence, taxation, land practices, and so on, can be separated (however artificially) from the “other-worldly” aspects of perfection/salvation involving the proper performance of rituals, recognition of divinely guided leaders, and so forth. Thus, while this theory of Muslim sects and schools highlights claims to perfection/salvation by particular groups as the most salient element in the grand narratives of sectarianism (and school affiliation), it also allows that the theme of salvation is not the exclusive purview of “religious” narratives alone. Sect and school narratives, while distinctive, often bleed into other (notably political) kinds of narratives. In the medieval period as in the modern, “sectarianism can be political.”<sup>51</sup>

Having determined to treat Muslim sects and schools through the lens of intra-Islamic narratives of perfection and salvation, a few more questions remain to be answered. Namely, it is time to ask whose versions of the grand sect narratives will be related, and to consider how best to tell them. The answers to these questions will be determined, in part, by which sources are available to us as historians of Muslim sects and schools, the nature of those sources, as well as by the positions we take vis-à-vis these narratives in our capacity as scholars of religion. It is a common fact that historians almost never have access to the sources for which they might wish, and must therefore learn to use those that they do possess. For example, with the exception of coins, almost nothing survives from Khārijite authors outside of poetry, a few letters, and

<sup>51</sup> Weiss, *In the Shadow of Sectarianism*, 11.



a creed, all of which is preserved in non-Khārijite sources. There are, however, a plethora of pro-ʿAlīd, Shiʿite, Muʿtazilite, proto-Sunni, Sunni, and Ibādī Muslim authors and editors that treat the subject of the Khārijites with varying degrees of sympathy or polemic. Moreover, it is often clear that these authors are using some kind of original Khārijite writings as the sources for their own accounts. The core narratives, what we might even call the central “myths,” of the Khārijite sect and its subjects, then, must be reconstructed, for the most part, from hybrid, written sources that range from receptive to hostile, and the rhetorical approaches that shaped the various accounts of this core narrative must be appreciated for how they molded the interpretation of these stories.<sup>52</sup> This process will not give us “history” in the modern sense, but an idea of the narrative that either guided or horrified those who interacted with it. And while the problem of sources might be more acute when dealing with the Khārijites, the general problem of sources, their hybridity and their rhetorical edges, similarly plagues the study of the other *fīraq* to varying degrees.

Another aspect of the issue of our sources becomes apparent in the case of groups who guard their sources as the property of an exclusive, secretive, and/or initiated elite. The Nuṣayrīs, for example, do not generally discuss their group’s narratives with outsiders, preferring to keep their rituals, beliefs, cosmologies, and soteriologies a guarded secret. In many cases, then, a researcher will have to suffice with what little information is available.

When it comes to other groups, such as the Ibādīyya, a different situation presents itself. The Ibādīyya have preserved a robust literature spanning their 1,300 years or so of existence. This literature springs from two continents (Africa and Asia) and can be found in several languages, notably Arabic, Berber, and Swahili. With the Ibādīyya, enough primary source materials exist so as not to have to depend on hostile outside sources. However, relying exclusively on Ibādī narratives of their group’s identity brings its own difficulties. For example, some Ibādī presentations of their early history differ from what academic historians of the Ibādīyya have discovered through critical examination of their early texts. Moreover, later narratives on Ibādism, such as those penned by the great Omani Ibādī scholar ʿAbd al-Ḥumayd al-Sālimī (d. 1914), were invested in presenting a particular version of Ibādism that differs in some senses from that which fell from the pens of medieval Ibādī scholars. Thus, just as modern historians must be selective in what they present as the “history” of any given topic, so too, Muslim writers select, edit, and simplify their materials in order to present a specific version of their group’s narrative identification. This issue becomes more intractable when we recognize that sect/school

<sup>52</sup> See Haider, *The Rebel and the Imām*, 6–16.

authors often do not recognize their group as developing. Rather, these authors tend to view the group as preserving the unchanging and original message of Islam, and thus, not developing so much as conserving what they believe to be the pristine religion. Thus, from certain Ibādī perspectives, their group is believed to have existed *more or less in the same form* from the time of the Prophet until now. There are, then, both older and newer, insider and outsider, pristine and developmental narratives of Ibādism. And given that the narratives of sects/schools are always shifting, the question, once again, becomes: which narratives to privilege? Essentially, what is required is a means to report on a centuries-long, unfolding discourse about sect/school identification involving numerous participants, both from within and outside that tradition. Though it presents a formidable task with no easy solution, this book will attempt to present as many viewpoints as feasible within the confines of the chapters, hoping that the general development of the sect/school can be addressed alongside of what group members view as its salient features.

Lastly, there are different kinds of sources for the study of sect/school narratives, ranging from the standard fare of history, written sources, to coins, archeological sites, material culture, and art, as well as living communities. As this study revolves about the notion of sect/school as narrative identifications, it will (for the most part) privilege written sources. Written sources come with their own set of historiographical issues, many of which are well-known to students of Islamic studies, and will not be rehearsed here.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, in privileging written sources I do not mean to imply that archeology, material culture, art history, numismatics, and anthropology are unimportant to the study of Islamic sects and schools. On the contrary, much of the most exciting work being done on Muslim sects and schools is coming from these disciplines, and I will incorporate as much of this material as proves feasible.

### **The Structure of the Book, and How to Use It**

Eco claims that a text, a narrative, is a “lazy machine asking the reader to do some of its work,” meaning that narratives rely to a great degree on shared assumptions, cultural knowledge, and “common sense” (which is often culturally framed) to build their stories.<sup>54</sup> This is also the case for participants in the narratives of Muslim sects and schools. Much is assumed when the stories of particular groups become articulated and

<sup>53</sup> Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 125–229; Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, 83–158.

<sup>54</sup> Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, 3.

then set down in dusty books. Of course, for students unfamiliar with early Islamic history, or with the cultural frames of the early Islamic world, these narrative assumptions appear as blank spaces, bewildering to those without the requisite cultural knowledge. The historian, therefore, must fill them in, and it is the task of Chapter 2 to provide a background for the emergence of various sectarian and school narratives. This book, however, is neither an introduction to Islam, nor a history of Muslims, nor is it intended to be overly long. Thus, Chapter 2 focuses only on those events and processes that form the backdrop to the development of Muslim sects and schools. Those seeking a broader introduction to Islam or Muslim history should consider themselves warned, and can consult the many excellent works on these topics that have appeared in the last decades.

After laying the groundwork for the emergence of Muslim sects and schools, the following four chapters address the five main divisions among Muslims. Chapter 3 treats the Khārijites and Ibāḍiyya; Chapter 4 delves into the Shi'a and their main subdivisions; Chapter 5 discusses the Murji'ites and Mu'tazilites; and Chapter 6 provides an overview of the long development of Sunnism. Recognizing that these chapters might be used in isolation, I have made an attempt to repeat certain key themes from the historical overview, and to tie these chapters to grand narratives that emerge from the *longue durée* of their histories, and that seem to guide those who emplot themselves within them. These grand narratives, it should be remembered, remain malleable to a degree, as an innovative thinker can shift them in subtle ways to orient the group differently.

Chapter 7, as indicated above, attempts to provide some perspective across the narrowly focused silos of the earlier chapters. By examining areas of ambiguity in the practice, definition, and theory of Muslim sectarianism, this penultimate chapter hopes to recomplicate the too-neat chapters that preceded it, and to leave the reader with more questions than answers. The proper way, I believe, to frame a book on Muslims sects and schools is with a sober assessment of the fragility of our knowledge, and the ambiguities of our subject. This introduction and Chapter 7, then, form the theoretical bookends around the group-specific chapters of this work. If the reader is rather more familiar with Muslims sects and schools it is hoped that these chapters might provide a starting point for more abstract discussion on our topic. Chapter 8 provides a summary of the main themes of the book, reemphasizing some of the main points made in this introduction.